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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest explores factors that affect creativity in children and techniques for fostering this quality. The need to study creativity and the definition of creativity within a developmental framework are also discussed. Six ways adults can encourage children's creativity are listed. It is pointed out that adults can encourage creativity by emphasizing the generation and expression of ideas in a non-evaluative framework, and by concentrating on both divergent and convergent thinking. Adults can also try to ensure that children have the opportunity and confidence to take risks, challenge assumptions, and see things in a new way. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

EDO-PS-88-6

Creativity in Young Children

James D. Moran III

The precursors of adult creativity are clearly evident in young children. This digest explores factors that affect creativity in children and techniques for fostering this quality. The need to study creativity, and the definition of creativity within a developmental framework, are also discussed.

Why Study Creativity in Young Children?

Just as all children are not equally intelligent, all children are not equally creative. But just as all children exhibit behaviors which evidence intelligence from birth, they also exhibit behaviors which evidence the potential for creativity.

Creativity is essentially a form of problem-solving. But it is a special type of problem-solving—one that involves problems for which there are no easy answers: that is, problems for which popular or conventional responses do not work. Creativity involves adaptability and flexibility of thought. These are the same types of skills that numerous reports on education (e.g., the Carnegie Report, 1986) have suggested are critical for students.

What Is Creativity?

Creativity has been considered in terms of process, product or person (Barron and Harrington, 1981) and has been defined as the interpersonal and intrapersonal process by means of which original, high quality, and genuinely significant products are developed. In dealing with young children, the focus should be on the process, i.e., developing and generating original ideas, which is seen as the basis of creative potential. When trying to understand this process, it is helpful to consider Guilford's (1956) differentiation between convergent and divergent thought. Problems associated with convergent thought often have one correct solution. But problems associated with divergent thought require the problem-solver to generate many solutions, a few of which will be novel, of high quality, and workable—hence creative.

For a proper understanding of children's creativity, one must distinguish creativity from intelligence and talent. Ward (1974) expressed concern about whether creativity in young children could be differentiated from other cognitive abilities. More recent studies (for example, Moran and others, 1983) have shown that components of creative potential can indeed be distinguished from intelligence. The term "gifted" is often used to imply high intelligence. But Wallach (1970) has argued that intelligence and creativity are independent of each other, and a highly creative child may or may not be highly intelligent.

Creativity goes beyond possession and use of artistic or musical talent. In this context, talent refers to the possession of a high degree of technical skill in a specialized area. Thus an artist may have wonderful technical skills, but may not succeed in evoking the emotional response that makes the viewer feel that a painting, for example, is unique. It is important to keep in mind that creativity is evidenced not only in music, art, or writing, but throughout the curriculum, in science, social studies and other areas.

Most measures of children's creativity have focused on ideational fluency. Ideational fluency tasks require children to generate as many responses as they can to a particular stimulus, as is done in brainstorming. Ideational fluency is generally considered to be a critical feature of the creative process. Children's responses may be either popular or original, with the latter considered evidence of creative potential. Thus when we ask four-year-olds to tell us "all the things they can think of that are red," we find that children not only list wagons, apples and cardinals, but also chicken pox and cold hands.

For young children, the focus of creativity should remain on process: the generation of ideas. Adult acceptance of multiple ideas in a non-evaluative atmosphere will help children generate more ideas or move to the next stage of self-evaluation. As children develop the ability for self-evaluation, issues of quality and the generation of products become more important. The emphasis at this age should be on self-evaluation, for these children are exploring their abilities to generate and evaluate hypotheses, and revise their ideas based on that evaluation. Evaluation by others

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and criteria for genuinely significant products should be used only with older adolescents or adults.

What Affects the Expression of Creativity?

For young children, a non-evaluative atmosphere appears to be a critical factor in avoiding what Treffinger (1984) labels as the "right answer fixation." Through the socialization process, children move toward conformity during the elementary school years. The percentage of original responses in ideational fluency tasks drops from about 50% among four-year-olds to 25% during elementary school, then returns to 50% among college students (Moran et al., 1983). It is important that children be given the opportunity to express divergent thought and to find more than one route to the solution.

Rewards or incentives for children appear to interfere with the creative process. Although rewards may not affect the number of responses on ideational fluency tasks, they seem to reduce the quality of children's responses and the flexibility of their thought. In other words, rewards reduce children's ability to shift from category to category in their responses (Groves, Sawyers, and Moran, 1987). Indeed, any external constraint seems to reduce this flexibility. Other studies have shown that structured materials, especially when combined with structured instructions, reduce flexibility in four-year-old children (Moran, Sawyers, and Moore, in press). In one case, structured instructions consisted only in the demonstration of how to put together a model. Teachers need to remember that the structure of children's responses is very subtle. Research suggests that children who appear to be creative are often involved in imaginative play, and are motivated by internal factors rather than external factors, such as rewards and incentives.

How Can Adults Encourage Creativity?

- Provide an environment that allows the child to explore and play without undue restraints.
- Adapt to children's ideas rather than trying to structure the child's ideas to fit the adult's.
- Accept unusual ideas from children by suspending judgement of children's divergent problem-solving.
- Use creative problem-solving in all parts of the curriculum. Use the problems that naturally occur in everyday life.
- Allow time for the child to explore all possibilities, moving from popular to more original ideas.
- Emphasize process rather than product.

Conclusion

Adults can encourage creativity by emphasizing the generation and expression of ideas in a non-evaluative framework and by concentrating on both divergent and convergent thinking. Adults can also try to ensure that children have the opportunity and confidence to take risks, challenge assumptions, and see things in a new way.

For More Information

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